

# Americans Tepid Toward Lithuania

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Americans, whose leaders long espoused the cause of the Baltic region's "captive nations," have proven distinctly unenthusiastic about the battle for Lithuania, the first of those nations to seek its freedom from Moscow.

Recent polls have found that most Americans are not prepared to endanger Soviet-American relations on behalf of Lithuanian independence and that Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev's harsh campaign of economic and political pressure against Lithuania has done little to dent his favorable public image here.

The American popular reaction stands in contrast to over four decades of instinctive support for revolts against communist rule in which Americans have tended to embrace virtually all Eastern European causes fought in the name of human rights.

American supporters of the Lithuanian cause lament that one of the main reasons for the cautious American response is Gorbachev's remarkable success in crafting a heroic image. They note that Americans seem willing to accord him benefits-of-the-doubt that they would not think of allowing any previous Soviet leader.

For example, Patrick J. Glynn, a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute and a Gorbachev critic, referred in frustration to a recent article in *Vanity Fair*, a magazine noted for spotting trends. "Let's face it," Glynn said, "when he's on the cover of *Vanity Fair*, you know that it's the greatest PR campaign in history."

But both critics and supporters of President Bush's cautious approach to Lithuania argue that something deeper may be at work—a new and remarkably widespread feeling that American interests and Soviet interests are not in conflict to the degree they once were, largely because of Gorbachev himself.

"Much of it has to do with a feeling of both awe and appreciation on the part of the American people for what Gorbachev has done," said Rep. Steven J. Solarz (D-N.Y.), a member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee. "Much of what happened in Eastern Europe, much that Americans never expected to see, would not have happened without Gorbachev. There's a sense that this man is a kind of world-transforming figure."

Because of this, Solarz said, Americans rank Gorbachev's survival at least as high in their list of priorities as the cause of Lithuanian freedom. "There's a sense that the Lithuanians, by confronting Gorbachev in this way, have created a situation in which his personal survival is at stake," Solarz said. "So there's a reluctance to embrace a cause that in other circumstances they would cheer on."

Advocates of the Lithuanian cause, well aware of Gorbachev's popular standing in the United States, cast some of their own arguments in pro-Gorbachev terms. For example, Asta Banionis, director of public affairs for the Lithuanian-American Community Inc., contends that by taking a tougher line, President Bush could "give Gorbachev some leverage against the hard-liners" in the Kremlin.

Supporters of the Lithuanian government, who have been frustrated by Bush's mild reaction, said the president's decision to play down the issue had contributed to the absence of an outcry on behalf of Lithuanians.

"On issues like this that are difficult, there's going to be natural support for the president of the United States," said Rep. C. Christopher Cox (R-Calif.). "If the president had taken the opposite tack, people would have said 'that's reasonable,' too."

Cox, who visited Lithuania in February and favors recognition of Lithuanian independence, believes that the administration's stance has encouraged Ameri-

cans to see the choice—mistakenly, he believes—as being between good relations with the Soviets and support for Lithuania.

Lithuanian-Americans believe that the Soviets improved their public standing by learning and applying the lessons taught in last year's uprising in China and in South Africa. By forcing Western reporters out of Lithuania, said Banionis, the Soviet Union has drastically reduced television coverage of the Lithuanian story, thereby minimizing its impact on American public opinion.

"We just haven't gotten the television pictures," she said. "When the pictures are removed, it's very, very difficult."

Douglas Seay, an analyst on Eastern Europe at the conservative Heritage Foundation who supports recognition of Lithuania, said the Lithuanian cause also suffered from the simple exhaustion of the American people with foreign policy issues after a year of unprecedented events. Even the fall of the Berlin Wall drew relatively low television ratings, he said; the Lithuanian situation would inevitably arouse less interest.

Also cutting into support for Lithuanian independence is the reluctance of some conservative Republicans to highlight an issue on which they disagree with a president of their own party. A Democrat who expressed as much support for a Soviet leader as Bush has for Gorbachev would certainly run into harsher conservative criticism, according to Glynn, the American Enterprise Institute analyst.

Cox, the Republican congressman, said that while he believed Bush meant what he said in declaring support for the long-term goal of Lithuanian independence, he would be more suspicious of such statements if they came from Michael S. Dukakis, the 1988 Democratic presidential nominee.

"If it were Mike Dukakis," Cox said, "there would be no reason to pull my punches."